

WASHINGTON (24 March) - Today, the U.S. House of Representatives approved legislation sponsored by U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-Fla.), member of the House Homeland Security Committee, which would strengthen America's maritime borders by screening interdicted aliens at sea against Department of Homeland Security (DHS) biometric watch lists.

H.R. 1148 would require the Secretary of Homeland Security to formalize and expand the successful mobile maritime biometric identification program to combat aliens unlawfully attempting to enter the United States. The bill also requires DHS to ensure this biometric system is integrated into other systems within DHS and other Agencies.

"Since its inception in 2006, this pilot program has been a sweeping success. It ensures that individuals with criminal records attempting to enter the United States illegally by sea will not simply be returned to their homelands," said Bilirakis. "I am pleased that the House has once again passed this legislation, and I am hopeful it will be signed into law. Expanding the biometric tracking system for maritime interdictions is a crucial step forward in securing our border."

Earlier today, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano expressed that the Department would "significantly increase" the use of "biometric enforcement", in an effort to enhance border security.

Since the beginning of the Coast Guard's biometrics pilot in the Caribbean in November 2006, the Coast Guard has collected biometric data (fingerprints and photographs) from 2,455 migrants, using handheld scanners. This has resulted in the identification of 598 individuals with criminal records and the U.S. Attorney's Office in San Juan, Puerto Rico has prosecuted 271 individuals for violations of U.S. law, with a 100% conviction rate.

H.R. 1148 is similar to H.R. 2490, which passed the House in the 110th Congress by a vote of 394 – 3 on July 29, 2008.